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AN EFFORT TO SECURE SINCERITY IN COMPOSITION

KATHARINE H. SHUTE

BOSTON NORMAL SCHOOL

In these autumn days of 1918 when our world is going mad with joy, when bells are ringing and horns are blowing, when eager, foreign-looking crowds are filling our streets with child-like demonstrations of delight, when the old world is crying out to be made over, can there be any question that whatever else we teach or fail to teach, we must strive to develop in the younger generation those essential elements of character which alone can save the world? For even a great war involving the loftiest heroism and the most colossal sacrifice will not redeem the world—nor any little fragment of it. It is only as an overwhelming number of the individuals who make up that world learn to live for something larger than themselves, not in some great crisis only, but day by day in the commonplace struggle, that the world can hope to rise to higher levels of life.

It may seem like a far cry from these great issues to a simple experiment tried now for six years in our English composition course. Nevertheless it is because this bit of work has seemed to us particularly rich in character-making value that I venture to describe it at a time when we are all challenging our school procedures, as never before, to discover whether or not they are contributing to the things

of the spirit. We call the piece of writing in question "A Biographical Portrait" or "A Biographical Sketch;" in the beginning, it is true, we employed the more ambitious term, "A Biography," but chastening experience has taught us better. The fundamental feature of the plan is not original with us; it was suggested by a member of the English department at Harvard University. Doubtless it has been tried in other schools and colleges. It is simply that the piece of biographical work done by every pupil during the freshman year shall concern someone whose biography has never been written before. This requirement at once dismisses the encyclopedia, and, to a certain extent, the library itself. It reduces to a negligible quantity the possibility of borrowing from classmates, securing, instead, investigation, organization and expression that are the pupil's own. But it hardly needs to be pointed out that merely assigning a piece of work is not enough to secure the hours of painstaking effort necessary to produce a satisfactory result. An adequate motive must be found to impel the students to their best endeavor. Moreover, the result cannot be considered successful, no matter how painstaking the effort, unless it has warmth and sincerity of tone. This last essential can be achieved only when the writer has chosen a subject that he really cares about. But, again, knowing one's subject and caring about it are not sufficient, although indispensable, for success; the writer must be possessed of standards which will guide him in finding effective expression for what he has to say; he must have something to measure his own work against.

With all these things in mind,—an adequate motive, honest, painstaking effort in gathering material, a product that shall be characterized by warmth of feeling and some charm of expression, we manage our work as follows. Early in September, as soon as we begin to feel at home with our new pupils and they with us, we explain that the first long piece of composition, to be passed in at the end of six weeks, is to be a biographical sketch of someone known to the writer, someone well worth writing about, and—above all—someone whose biography has not been written heretofore. With a faith born of experience, we assure the girls that every one of them must know someone whose character, experiences, or circumstances are inter-

esting enough to be recorded and to be shared with other people. Doubtless a number of them, we suggest, will be able to make what may justifiably be called "contributions," which will afford pleasure, and offer information worth having, to an audience composed of their classmates and teachers. We advise them to choose from their parents' generation or their grand-parents' rather than from their own, and preferably someone known to them personally, but at any rate often talked of in their homes. The pupils are quick to feel that their families would value such a record; they realize that they themselves would be glad indeed to become possessed of such an account of some dear old friend or relative, had such a record ever been made.

After a few days, each student passes in her choice of a subject with a few brief statements dealing with character, experience, and background which are intended to serve as a justification of her choice. The choices are accepted or rejected, and possibly a few personal conferences are held before each student settles down to her own problem. Several other experiences bearing upon the question in hand are provided during the intervening weeks. For one thing, each teacher in the department talks with her own pupils about the purpose and characteristics of effective biography, illustrating her points by reading aloud, and discussing with more or less detail, but not too technically, selections from three sources: standard biographies, such as Booker Washington's "Up from Slavery;" biographical sketches, such as Anne Thackeray Ritchie's "Chapters from an Unwritten Memoir" (a prime favorite, with our girls, from this charming collection, being "From Willis's Rooms to Chelsea") and finally biographical themes written by predecessors who may still be students in our school. It is needless to say that this last named feature of the preparedness campaign is the most stimulating of all.

For another thing, each girl reads at home during this six weeks period—as a part of her required outside reading for the year, one standard biography or a group of biographical essays or sketches, which are selected from a list supplied to each student. Each pupil makes, in class, a brief report in her note-book. A few pupils give oral reports with illustrative readings, for the benefit of their classmates;

these are almost invariably enjoyed and lead to further reading on the part of the listeners.

In the third place, my associates in the department have recently worked out a plan which has proved most fruitful, in accordance with which brief themes are written dealing with the material that is to go into the major theme. Such themes may be attempted as describing personal appearance; they may narrate some character-revealing incident; or they may be efforts at character analysis. One of our teachers insists that each student shall read her theme aloud to an audience, of one at least, before submitting it to the instructor for criticism. All such themes are given the benefit of careful examination and constructive criticism. Fortunately our program provides for an eight minute conference with each pupil once in two weeks throughout the year; this arrangement is simply invaluable.

The completed biographical sketches vary greatly in merit; but they certainly deserve one word of commendation—they seldom fail to ring true. Many of them, moreover, are really very pleasant reading, and are listened to by an audience of classmates and teachers, with warm appreciation. I hardly need to say that these essays are not very profound in their analysis of character; they are, however, strong in the matter of background, for our school is distinctly cosmopolitan, and many of the students recognize that they may succeed in making a "contribution" by painting some scene, some mode of living, unfamiliar to their classmates. Indeed it is not unusual for one set of papers to carry us from Norway to Italy, or from Russia to America. The girls are inclined, also, to dwell on the childhood of their heroes and heroines, a very natural result in a normal school, where the attention of the students is constantly directed to children.

I must add that we know that these themes are not remarkable in any way. In all of them extraordinary events are rare; thrilling experiences are conspicuous by their absence: the significance and poetry of the commonplace are the dominant note. Their one merit is their *genuineness*, for they do seem to us to be genuine as to facts, genuine from the stand point of preparation, and above all genuine in feeling. The occasional tenderness, humor, or graphic quality of some word or phrase is, I believe, due to sincere

feeling aided by the desire to find expression that shall be worthy. None of the accompanying selections owe what merit they have to the editing of teachers; they stand practically as they were written when they were passed in, still needing revision in some instances. Interesting examples might be given of good material crudely organized and expressed, accompanied by the constructive criticisms of the teacher, and by the revised versions made by the students; but space forbids.

In summing up, I trust that I am not exaggerating the character-making values afforded by this kind of work if I state them as follows. *First*, the honest, painstaking effort to write something that shall give pleasure to others, perhaps even be of permanent value to one's own kin, is in itself a developing experience. *Second*, even the most immature analysis of a character worth perpetuating in writing helps the young writer to see and admire the mainspring of that character. I need hardly add that the mainspring is almost invariably some form of unselfishness,—a supreme sacrifice or a daily subordination of self to the welfare of others; occasionally, it is true, the power of the character lies in the determination to conquer all obstacles in order to arrive at some desired haven. *Third*, the attentive study of a personality which the writer has been in the habit of taking as much for granted as daily sunrise, often opens the eyes to beauty and charm heretofore unsuspected, and leads to a new and keen appreciation of the familiar things within one's reach. *Fourth*, the foreign origin of many of the subjects of these biographies and their unvarying love for the home of their adoption, when the natural pangs of home-sickness have subsided, contribute to a deeper appreciation of what our country means—marvelous melting-pot that it is! *Fifth*, and last in this long inventory, inasmuch as there is a marked absence of false pride in these simple records, on the contrary a most straight-forward recognition of poverty and limited advantages, it seems as if there must result a more discriminating estimate of the true values in life.

In choosing the following extracts from among many that might be made, I have had two features only in mind, variety in background and warmth of appreciation for pure and simple things.

AUNT RACHEL

(The subject of this sketch was one of that familiar group deserving canonization—the single women who bring up other people's children. "Aunt Rachel" gave up her dream of marriage and a home and children of her own, and cared for two successive generations of children, the first motherless, the second fatherless.)

Even in my earliest recollections Aunt Rachel has gray hair and a slight stoop. Associated with her in these recollections are a low, broad, gray house, a hair-cloth parlor set, and a what-not with a baby's worn-out shoe ornamenting one of the shelves. I distinctly remember mounting the three steps which led to the gray house, pulling the glass-knobbed bell and being ushered into the narrow hall-way by Aunt Rachel, herself, a tall, rather stern old lady, with beaming blue eyes.

* * * * *

She told me once that Jamie was just for all the world like a little angel. He had a pale blue coat that matched his eyes, and when he was taken out for an airing, people said that heaven's light was in his face. But he pined for his mother's arms; one day his spirit went forth to seek them. Little Georgie next demanded her care. He was Aunt Rachel's pet. Perhaps it was his little shoe that stood on the what-not. I think it must have been. Two short years he stayed with her. Longer than that not all her burning prayers nor her loving arms could hold him.

* * * * *

It was so pleasant, my mother has told me, to come home from school, tired and hungry, and find the kitchen warm and spotless, the stove nicely polished, and Aunt Rachel ironing away, perhaps, with a smile on her face.

* * * * *

In sickness Aunt Rachel was even more lovable than in health. The slight hauteur hitherto discernible in her face melted into an expression of patient wistfulness, and her eyes seemed to be bluer and brighter. "You are so good, so good," she would say, if you performed the slightest service for her.

* * * * *

"I hope she is happy," my mother said tearfully to the good priest who had attended her in her sickness. It was two days after Aunt Rachel's death, and they were standing beside the coffin, looking down on her peaceful face.

"She is happy," answered the priest solemnly, "for her soul is with God."

MY MOTHER

All the associations of my mother's childhood cluster around such famous spots as the Burying Ground on Copps Hill, Faneuil Hall, The State House, and The Old North Church. Anyone who has visited the old burying ground will realize what an ideal playground it would make. It commands an uninterrupted view of Boston harbor. It is green and shady. Just think of the opportunity for play among the old tombs and headstones! Mother has often said that the name and history of every person buried there were as familiar to the North End children as the names of their own families.

* * * * *

Many of the children shared one common joy,—the Boston Museum. A great many of the Shakesperian and classical plays were put on here. The children's privilege lay in the fact that on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons they were admitted to the first balcony for fifteen cents. It was entirely the work of a generous management. It became a common occurrence to hurry off after dinner on Saturdays to hear for example, "The School for Scandal," or "Macbeth." Afterwards, in good weather, the children would troop back to Copps Hill to give their own version of the play, with the largest tombs serving as stages.

A SELF-MADE MAN

One April morning in 1866, in the Southern county of D., a dusky son was born to Hannah and Stephen Gale. It was not such a long time ago that this man and woman had been numbered among that great body of unfortunates, the slaves. However the war was over, and the desire of their life had been granted to them; they were free.

Lost in the monotonous sameness of the rude wooden huts that stretched across the landscape was the one in which Walker Gale and his parents lived. As he looks back now to his early childhood, the experience which he recollects most vividly is the hour after supper. The meal is over; the things are cleared away. The father is playing his old accordin, and the children are gathered around his knees. Walter is dimly conscious of many dark figures outlined in the bright moonlight. They are lying around in various positions, and they are singing. The still summer air is filled with strange melody, now loud, now soft, now gay, now sorrowful. They are singing the old plantation songs. Never since has music so thrilled him; never since has it seemed so sweet.

AUNT ELLIE

Aunt Ellie was a little woman; yet she had that wonderful faculty of towering above all others; why, I cannot say; per-

haps because of the bigness of her heart. Although not bearing the name of mother, she was one from the very soul which she possessed. Did you ever see white hair that shone exactly like silver? Aunt Ellie's was like that. It was fine and glossy, and I considered it a great privilege to be allowed to brush and comb it. We were friends, Aunt Ellie and I.

She was born in Killarney, Ireland, the youngest of thirteen children. It must have been about 1840; I am not certain of the date, but it was early in June. To her the month of June was the most beautiful part of the year, and she always said that she hoped her death would be in June, the month of roses. I am happy in saying that her wish was gratified. Her education was begun at home, but later she was sent to a school which was more than two miles away from the immense farm on which she lived. In order to reach the school it was necessary to leap over many brooks, and Aunt Ellie found it delightful indeed to have one of her big brothers pick her up on his back and jump across the streams.

* * * * *

Persuaded by her older brothers and friends, Aunt Ellie at last decided to venture across the sea to America. She was a mere child, whose intention was to go home again, but after landing on this shore, at the close of six weeks upon a stormy, threatening ocean, she resolved, then and there, never again to brave the sea, so intense was her fear. It would be impossible to describe the feeling she experienced upon landing in this country. So disappointing was the sight which met her eyes that her heart sank within her. Tall buildings, narrow streets, long rows of houses, noisy, jostling crowds of busy people all served to dishearten her. A patch of blue sky here and there was the only reminder of home. Alas! an infinite waste of cruel, unrelenting water lay between Aunt Ellie and home.

A SCOTCH GRANDMOTHER

My grandmother first saw the light of day in a humble cottage on the isle of Skye, Scotland. The walls were built of rough stone, and above was a thatched roof. The shelter for the sheep was separated from the house by a single wall only; but this shelter was rarely used, for the sheep grazed on the neighboring hills. To these hills my grandmother often ran when a small girl to carry a delicious bannock to her brother, who cared for the sheep. Once arrived there she played among the sheep and challenged her brother to many a race up and down the heather-covered hills.

[The writer goes on to say that when her grandmother was "in her teens," the entire family, with many of their neighbors, emigrated to Prince Edward's Island, crossing in a sailing vessel in which they "tossed and rocked for seven long weeks." Here they made a new home, which came to be even dearer than the old.]

She has often described her father when the day's work was finished, marching around their new home, his shoulders thrown back, his face bright with joy, playing his pipes, while she sat in the doorway and listened with delight.

* * * * *

Among the neighbors there was one lad for whom my grandmother cared a great deal. They went to church together and walked home together through the quiet woods. When my grandmother was twenty-three, this lad asked her to marry him, and soon after they built a home for themselves.

[Then follows a sketch of the home, the eight children who come to gladden it, and the grandmother's neighborly offices despite her many cares.]

* * * * *

Grandmother was busy from morning till night. My father has said that she was the last one to go to bed, for she often sat up until twelve or one o'clock, making clothes for her children. Unlike the mothers of to-day, she did not have the cloth all ready to cut, but had to take the wool as it came from the sheep's back, and card it, spin it, and weave it, before the necessary clothes could be made.

* * * * *

During the Civil War in the United States, the people gathered at my grandmother's house to hear her read the weekly paper telling of the war. This paper was written in English, and as she was the only one in the neighborhood who could read English, she had to translate it into Gaelic for her visitors.

* * * * *

When the children grew older, they came to work in the United States and sent for her and their father. Two years after this, my grandfather died, and grandmother came to live with us. She is always cheerful and full of fun. I have seen her when the doctor has said that she could not live, smile at us and say, "You can't get rid of me that easy; 'I'll see you all married yet!'"

EDITORIAL NOTES

Miss Shute has in this leaflet presented a most valuable experiment in composition work with normal school girls. It would seem to be wholly suitable to try with any of our older high school classes. Sincerity in written work and development of character through English teaching,—the theme of our meeting on December 14,—are admirably exemplified in Miss Shute's essay.

Lack of space, we regret, prohibits our printing but a few of the interesting compositions selected by Miss Shute. Those teachers who wish to read more of them, or learn further details concerning this type of work done at the Boston Normal School, should write to Miss Katharine Shute, 331 Walnut Avenue, Roxbury, Mass.

Occasionally a member writes that no leaflets have been received this fall. The October number, "The English Teacher and the World War," and the November issue, "The High School Library," may be obtained by writing to Mr. A. B. DeMille, Milton, Mass.. At present the mailing list is being revised and corrected. Please send changes of address at once to the secretary, Mr. DeMille.

The Association is grateful to Mr. George Browne for his aid in preparing the program for our fall meeting. In the absence of President Hinchman and Vice-President Aydelotte he has been invited by the Executive Committee to preside and lead the discussion.

Please spread the news of our meeting at the Boston Public Library on December 14. Your program is enclosed with this leaflet. **English for Character** should be of interest to all teachers.

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